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Chief Chinese Puzzle

Mao Tse-tung

AT 73, Mao Tse-tung, the "red sun" of the world's most populous nation, remains to Westerners the most intricate of Chinese puzzles.

Is this aging son of peasant stock, who rose to dominance over a nation of well over 600 million, still the spark and the

Man "thought" of today's turbulent China? That was the major question of the "China watchers" as Mao observed his birthday without public fanfare yesterday.

The moon face, now become puffy, stares enigmatically in recent page-wide, official newspaper photographs of giant Peking rallies. Despite his appearance as the central figure and his virtual deification at rallies attended by more than a million people, the voice has been silent, at least in public, these many months.

Peking's Jenmin Jih Pao, the official newspaper of the Communist party, had a full-page report on the party chairman yesterday entitled "Chairman Mao Is the Red Sun in the Hearts of Revolutionary People Throughout the World."

The official reports from Peking in recent months have portrayed the party chairman as directing the most far-reaching shake-up of his 17-year rule.

It was he, according to the reports, who initiated the so-called cultural revolution. It was he, the reports say, who as part of that effort loosed the youthful, fanatical Red Guards to crush so-called reactionary elements in high places of the party hierarchy.

Yet many experienced analysts of Chinese affairs believe that Chairman Mao is

no longer the guiding force.

They picture him as senile, or in declining health, and as the puppet of the Defense Minister, Lin Biao, who has emerged as his heir-apparent.

Many observers marvel at Chairman Mao's unquestioned hold on China's millions despite a number of muddled or even disastrous policies associated with his leadership.

Those include the "Great Leap Forward," a program designed to speed economic development, which instead set back the economy sharply, and the increasingly shrill vilification of both the United States as the chief "imperialist" enemy and the Soviet Union as the "betrayor" of Marxism, a policy that has led to China's isolation.

Yet observers over the years have credited Mr. Mao with great stamina, with a masterly flexibility in changing tactics, and with great sensitivity to the pulse of the masses.

There are few reliable personal anecdotes about him. Until he became a virtual recluse in recent years, living in an unpretentious house with his fourth wife, he liked to talk to peasants and working people on his many inspection visits. His chain-smoking of cigarettes is said to have caused a cough that forced him to curb public speechmaking. He is known to have a salty tongue.

He was born in 1893 in the village of Shao Shan in the south-central province of Hunan, the son of a rice farmer who is said to have been a harsh parent.

Young Mao knew severe poverty, and was a witness to the merciless crack-down by China's rulers on rebellious peasants. From his earliest days, when he read by a light hidden under his blan-



Eastfoto, via Associated Press

A feel for the pulse of the masses.

ket to avoid his father's wrath, he has been an avid reader, both of Chinese classics and Western works. But his only two trips outside the country were to Moscow, both after he was 55 years old.

He attended schools in his home province, and in 1911 joined the local revolutionary forces backing Sun Yat-sen in the overthrow of the 267-year-old Manchu dynasty. Having read the works of Marx and accounts of the

Russian Revolution, he was ready in 1921 to become one of the first 12 members of the Chinese Communist party at its founding in Shanghai.

For a time the Communists and the Kuomintang, Sun Yat-sen's successful revolutionary movement, cooperated against the northern war lords and later in the 1930's against the invading Japanese. By that time Chiang Kai-shek had assumed leadership of the Kuomintang.

But Chiang Kai-shek became and has remained the main enemy.

Starting in October, 1934, Mr. Mao led Communist soldiers and followers on the epic "long march" to break out of encirclement by forces of the Chiang-led National Government. The round-about march lasted a year and covered nearly 6,000 miles. It started with Mr. Mao leading 100,000 from Kiangsi Province in the South. It ended, after constant harassment by the Chiang forces, with the Communist chief taking 20,000 soldiers into Yenan in the northern province of Shensi.

Mr. Mao made almost the whole march on foot, recruiting on the way. Quickly recovering, his forces fought the Japanese through World War II and then turned overwhelming power against general Chiang in the civil war, which last ended from 1946 until the Communist triumph in 1949.

Until 1959, Mr. Mao was head of state in addition to party chairman, but in relinquishing the former position he appeared to lose none of his power.

He has two daughters and a son from his marriages. His second wife was executive by nationalist forces. His present wife, Chiang Ching, a former actress, is deputy head of the group in charge of the cultural revolution.